

Sri Lanka: widespread discontent among tsunami survivors

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Every day in Sri Lanka, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government announces through the television and other media a long list of assistance it is providing for the survivors of the December 26 tsunami. But the reality is completely different. Increasingly, the disaster's victims are holding protests, demanding adequate food, water, shelter and sanitary facilities.

On February 2, Tilak Ranavirajah, the government's relief operation chief, had to admit that only 30 percent of affected people had received government relief. Ranavirajah, the commissioner general of essential services appointed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, added: "The president has directed me to ensure that at least 70 to 75 percent of them get the government relief by February 7."

Government officials have been forced to belatedly admit the lack of relief operations in the face of developing mass anger and demonstrations.

In the last week of January, we visited several camps and villages in the south, at Ambalangoda, Galle and Hambantota, to meet survivors. Although the main road linking these coastal communities with the capital Colombo has been cleared, the repair of the railway and the restoration of even limited electricity and water supplies are proceeding at a snail's pace.

Patabandimulla is a coastal village in Ambalangoda. Survivors returned to the village from the refugee camp at Dharmashoka school on January 27 to pave the way for the reopening of the school and because of the defence-less situation of women and girls. Villagers reconstructed ruined "houses" with wooden planks. Another 200 refugees still at Dharmashoka school were to be sent to another school on that day.

The people of Patabandimulla are fishermen and their families. They lost all their houses, belongings and fishing equipment in the tsunami. For food, each refugee had received only 1 kilogram of rice, 250 grams of dhal and 100 grams of sugar—not even enough for three days for an adult. Now they had been issued a yellow card for dry rations and a blue card for mats and pillows. But each family got only one mat and one pillow. How could a family sleep on one mat, people asked.

For those families whose houses were completely destroyed, the government gave them ten 6 feet x 3 feet corrugated sheets and 2,500 rupees (about \$US25) to buy other materials. How could people build even a hut with these things, residents asked.

Leelawathie, 63, and Simon, 73, said their family, with three sons and a daughter-in-law, used to live happily in a six-roomed house. Now they were very worried about their situation because the government expected them to live in a hut built from planks. "We earned our living without begging others. But now government officials treat us as beggars. We didn't receive any of the tents donated from abroad. They should give us a house that we can live in, and fishing equipment," complained Leelawathie.

B. M. Indika Shyamalee, 31, is a housewife and her husband R. M. Anura, 33, is a fisherman. With their 8-year-old and 4½-year-old daughters, they stayed at the Karaththakanda temple for five days and

another five days at the Dharmashoka school. "We got breakfast at 10, lunch at 3-4 in the afternoon and dinner at 9, but these meals were inedible. We came here to our mother's place, but the walls of this house have cracks and it is dangerous," Shyamalee said.

She complained that they had filled out lots of official forms, yet received nothing. The village officer and the government officials hesitated to register damaged houses. Exhausted, Shyamalee said angrily: "Although there is news everyday on TV and in newspapers that the president has appointed committees and officials to look after [affected people], we haven't seen anyone."

An 11-year-old schoolgirl explained: "The schools are not yet functioning properly despite the government's claim. I received only two 40-page exercise books. I have no uniforms and no textbooks. Now, 11 of us live in the kitchen that remained after the tsunami. Several of my classmates are in same difficult situation. We are uncertain about our future."

Tsunami-affected villagers at Pitipana near Boossa, 106 km south of Colombo, engaged in a protest campaign on January 22 to highlight their anger over conditions. They demanded relief until they can find ways to earn income, kitchen utensils, fishing equipment and improvised rope making machines.

Chandanie Ramyalatha, 31, a mother of two children, explained: "We have been let down throughout this five weeks. Although hundreds of us picketed along the road from 9 in the morning till 1 in the afternoon, no responsible person visited us. Then we blocked the main road. After three hours, the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) parliamentarian and fisheries minister, Chnadrasesa Wijesinghe, came and promised to provide relief and sort out our problems. But up to today [January 29] nothing has happened."

Pitipana villagers used to earn their living by fishing and coir rope making. Many had been removed from the poverty alleviation program (Samurdhi) in 2002. Now the fishermen have lost their jobs because the damaged Galle fisheries harbour had not yet been reconstructed. All were living on the income earned from rope making. Three people only earn 75 rupees (US 75 cents) a day if they make 9 kilos of ropes, which is very difficult.

J.B. Nandanie, a 34-year-old mother of one, said: "I make ropes and earn hardly 25 rupees a day. The traders give us only 8 or 8.50 rupees per kilo of rope. My husband supplies cinnamon leaves to oil mills and earns 50 to 75 rupees a day. But during some seasons he can't collect cinnamon leaves."

Since the disaster, families had received relief only three times. On January 8, they received 8 kg of rice, 250 grams of dhal, 100 biscuits and a piece of soap per family. On the second occasion, on January 20, the ration was reduced to 2 kg of rice and one can of tinned fish. The third ration, on January 26, was 3 kg of rice, 1 kg of sugar and one can of fish. No-one received the 2,500 rupees promised for kitchen utensils.

People remained nervous after the December 26 tragedy. On January 28,

people all along the coast ran inland after hearing a rumour that another tsunami was heading toward Sri Lanka.

At Dadalle, near Galle, 347 survivors lived in a camp. After staying in a temple for 10 days, some now lived in tents provided from Italy and others in makeshift wooden huts. About 60 percent of the families used to live by making coir carpets. The tidal waves washed away their raw materials and equipment.

In the camp, there were about 43 children aged 3-5 and 28 aged 6-10. Family members had to share a 10 x 16 tent. On dry days, the heat inside the tents was intolerable. There was no electricity, no adequate water supply, and just five toilets—three for adults and two for children. A first aid centre was run by a young person trained by a private institution, with the help of three students. There were shortages of essential first aid supplies. Already, six people had contracted chickenpox and three diarrhoea.

Inoka, a mother of three, condemned the government's indifference. "Although we did not receive a good income before December 26, we managed our lives somehow. Now the situation has worsened. No ministers, no MPs, no government officials have visited us. We don't like to live like orphans. What we request is a permanent place to live and facilities to restart our industry [carpet making]."

Grade eight student, Koshila Madushani, added: "We can't read after sunset. It is just like living in a cage. Will we be left to live like this forever?"

The clearing of rubble had not been finished at villages such as Akurala, Kahawa, Telwatte, Paraliya, Seenigama, Warallana and Thotagamuwa—an area of hundreds of hectares stretching 30 kilometres from Ambalangoda to Galle. Private contractors were employing about 1,200 unemployed youth in backbreaking work from 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening, paying them only 300 rupees a day, with a morning milk packet and lunch.

In the southern province, Hambantota was the worst affected area. According to the latest government statistics provided by Hambantota divisional secretary M. A. Piyasena, 16,994 families or 70,968 persons were badly affected. Deaths totalled 3,067, with 963 missing, and 3,334 families displaced.

We talked to people from the Karagam lagoon area and the east and west sectors of Hambantota town, where about 800 houses and 2,000 families were affected. They lived in tents erected near the New Jumma and Dharmakabir mosques, and with relatives. The government declared the east and west sectors prohibited areas and was trying to evacuate people living there in temporary tents.

About 1,500 people held a protest picket on January 19 to show their opposition to the government's decision and to demand relief, including places for resettlement and facilities to restart their livelihoods. The government then temporarily halted the evacuations but has not provided basic relief, or adequate subsidies, even after five weeks.

The people living in 27 tents near the New Jumma mosque had only two toilets. For two weeks in January, these families received rations—20 kg of rice, 8 kg of sugar, 4 kg of dhal, 250 grams of tea leaves, 4 tins of canned fish and 2 bottles of mineral water. As there were no cooking facilities, they still had to get meals from the Dharmakabir mosque or other places.

Mohomed Rilvan, treasurer of the displaced persons' organisation told the WSWS that up to January 8, residents obtained assistance only from voluntary groups and local people. Environmental minister A. H. M. Fowzie and deputy plantation minister Chamal Rajapakse visited the area and promised two water tanks on January 15, but nothing had happened as of January 28.

"Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Chamal Rajapakse came here three times and told us to leave the area. They are concerned, not about our conditions, so much as in freeing the area to carry out the government's long-standing plan to build an international harbour here,"

he said.

People were determined to oppose any attempt to evict them. They were also against the plans to demolish the New Jumma mosque.

JVP parliamentarian Anjan Umma and opposition United National Front (UNF) MP, M. H. Mohamed, visited the area to pacify residents. N. P. Rauddeen commented: "But they didn't talk about any solution to the fishermen's problems."

He added: "What the government is trying to do, is to remove us from our places by utilising its new 100 metre limit [on building near the coast]. They are going to push us to Siribopura, 3 km from Hambantota town. How can we carry out fishing from such a distance to the beach?"

"In addition to protecting our boats and other equipment, there will be several other problems. We don't have an exact timetable for going to sea for fishing and returning. Sometimes we have to be at sea for several days. So, we will not be able to fish with our current facilities if we have to live at 3 to 4 km from the sea.

"If the 100-metre limit is imposed, we need new facilities for fishing. But we can't believe that the government will provide them. No government that has been in the office so far has taken measures to solve the real problems of the fishermen."

People complained that even after five weeks they had not received the amounts promised by the government—2,500 rupees for kitchen utensils, 5,000 rupees as calamity relief and 15,000 rupees for each person killed. They faced bureaucratic restrictions when applying for aid. Officials were demanding documents like death certificates, birth certificates, marriage certificates and national identity cards. Residents asked: "How can we provide them, when all of them were washed away?"

M. H. Kichchil Nona, 47, said: "Government officials are working to create further troubles for us. We learned about ruins in our school history lessons. Today we have to live in the ruins of our own houses and lands. No one has a real interest in our problems. On January 26, the president came to inaugurate the construction of the Siribopura housing scheme. That day thousands of us held a rally here, demanding solutions for our problems. But she was flying over our heads and didn't bother to visit us to share our sorrow."

The Hambantota district secretary said that from February each affected person would receive 175 rupees worth of dry rations and 200 rupees in cash per week through cooperative societies. In addition, displaced people would be given allowances of 2,500 and 5,000 rupees. But, with the cost of living, 375 rupees would be insufficient for one person per week. Displaced people said the 2,500- and 5,000-rupee allowances would not cover even basic necessities.

As our visit revealed, thousands of people in Hambantota, one of most impoverished districts in the country, have been devastated by the disaster. Across the entire country, according to recent reports, the official unemployment has jumped to 20 percent, with the tsunami directly destroying about 400,000 jobs.

These conditions will only intensify poverty, unemployment and social inequality. The protests by tsunami-affected people at Pitipana, Boossa and Hambantota are early indications of mass unrest. It was under these conditions that the president put the military in charge of relief operations and on January 6 imposed emergency regulations.



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